

The Scarcity Slot: Excavating Histories of Food Security

Amanda Logan

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In *The Scarcity Slot: Excavating Histories of Food Security*, Amanda Logan argues that African foodways are persistently depicted as lacking in abundance, taste, and history. They are portrayed, she argues, as static and unchanging, and at the mercy of overly harsh environments. Such depictions, which Logan calls “the scarcity slot,” are pervasive in popular media, development policy directives, archaeological studies, and beyond. The issue with such descriptions, Logan argues, is that they don’t hold up to scrutiny. As an archaeologist, Logan is interested in tracking—and challenging—claims of scarcity across time, and as an archaeologist, she is well poised to do so. *The Scarcity Slot* delves into a long food history of Banda, a town in western Ghana, beginning in the 1400s and ending in the present, taking the reader through major moments in time, including the introduction of crops such as maize, a 250-year drought, slaving raids, political unrest, colonial rule, and the neoliberal, post-colonial moment.

Logan explores how these major political-economic, social, and climatic events significantly altered foodways and livelihoods in Banda. Additionally, and importantly, Logan highlights how residents of Banda deployed creative strategies, deep knowledge, and flexible techniques to weather these events. Archaeological methods—combined with archival research and oral histories—allow Logan to cast a long temporal net. In doing so, she joins political-ecologists and critical agronomists, among others, who have continually stressed the ingenuity and resourcefulness of African farmers amidst popular narratives that would suggest otherwise (Berry 1993; Nyantakyi-Frimpong 2020).

For those of us not trained in archaeology, Logan leads with clarity, carefully explaining her methods and analysis. Throughout the book she builds a strong argument for using excavation of soil, of histories, of cuisines as a key method for food studies. Anecdotally, I’ve taught the book in both undergraduate and graduate classes in development studies and have found that it provides students with a sturdy discussion starter on how narratives of scarcity obfuscate the political economy of food and the agency and empirical realities of African farmers.

Zooming out, it’s not difficult to find examples of such narratives—or the scarcity slot—out in the world. Just open the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation’s latest *Goalkeepers* report, read an NPR article about fufu (Shields 2015), or consider the use of the term “orphan crops” (Dwyer, Ibe, and Rhee 2022).

The task at hand, then, is not to downplay serious issues related to food access. Instead, Logan situates her work as “a devoted study of the history of food scarcity and abundance across the continent”—a both/and kind of scenario (p. 15). In showing the creative ways in which people navigate systems of scarcity and abundance, *The Scarcity Slot* joins other recent publications, such as Ashanté M. Reese’s *Black Food Geographies* (2019), in pushing food studies to think deeply about how the discipline engages with certain communities and structural violence.

To this point, in the book’s concluding chapter Logan poses a number of questions: “What if regional African foodways were revered in the same manner as French cuisine, and African terroir and expert chefs were lauded for their creativity and evolved methods? What if the superior nutritional content of West African diets was held up as the gold standard to which we all should aspire?” (p. 167). These questions are provocations and opportunities for reflection. They may also serve as a guide for food studies programs to assess and revise their existing curricula. This offering, I argue, is one of Logan’s strongest contributions to food studies. Indeed, the African continent should be an essential component of food inquiry and education; Logan provides a framework for where to begin.

—Joeva Sean Rock, *University of Cambridge*

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Diners, Dudes, and Diets. How Gender and Power Collide in Food Media and Culture

Emily J. H. Contois

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A student in one of my modules on food media recently asked how a change in understanding of what constitutes “good

food” comes about. In attempting to explain the complexities of discourse change and the many aspects that influence it, I suggested they read *Diners, Dudes, and Diets*. This book exemplifies how food discourse is established, sustained, and ultimately resisted, and how this process is underpinned by power relations. Emily Contois describes how hegemonic forms of discourse are deployed to support, justify, and at the same time reject both the neoliberal capitalist economic model and postmodern consumption practices.

In the book, Contois explains this by using an example that intersects gender and food, analyzing an emergence and decline of a specific type of masculinity. “The dude” was created by and sustained for the needs of food marketing and media industries in the United States in the first two decades of the new millennium. Situated in this context and continuing through the recession that followed the 2008 financial crash, the book spells out how a “crisis of masculinity” identified during these years led to the industries’ deployment of the dude as a solution to the anxieties of “a real man.” Through the image of the dude, Contois maintains that industries were set to “convince men to engage in supposedly feminised activities” (p. 7), such as cooking, finding pleasure in good food, drinking sugar-free soda, eating yogurt, and taking care of their own health (through dieting). Presented in the media, cookbooks, and advertising as a man with an ambivalent relationship to both food and his body, Contois’ analysis of the dude sees him reject the middle-brow food preferences most prominently expressed in the so-called “foodie” movement for the more anti-elitist, hybrid taste that transgresses the traditional boundaries of high and low, embracing instead a mix of low-brow and fast-food foods. Further, the dude rejects the hegemonic (neoliberal) discourse that places care for personal health at the core of the individual’s responsibility. It could be added to Contois’s analysis that while rejecting the middle-brow food, the dude nevertheless still embraces the core foodie premise, thus continuing to support postmodern food consumption practices, such as a rejection of cultural boundaries. Through his food preferences, the dude adopts foodie characteristics, such as romanticizing foods associated with poverty, as well as omnivorousness, through which middle-class eaters signal their acceptance of all—including lower status—food practices (Johnson and Baumann 2014).

In this and in other cases she discusses in the book, Contois’ analysis demonstrates clearly how rejection of mainstream (hegemonic) food practices through media and advertising discourses instead works to maintain them and through rejection, to drive sales: the dude—like his British cousin, “a new British lad,” who emerged in the United Kingdom at

roughly the same time as the dude in the United States—retains “conventional masculinity’s social privileges and power” (p. 14) despite his seeming feminization. Even if the dude now cooks and eats yogurt, food media reassures him that some aspects of his masculinity—like the expectation to be successful in seducing women—will be enhanced by these foodie practices. In fact, to be more successful and better than women generally, the need to engage in restraint, such as limiting intake of sugar and fat, and to be always active, are non-negotiable. When he seeks to lose weight, for example, the dude does not diet and count calories as women do; instead, he is sold the idea using “detached coolness with tropes such as casual language, misogynistic humor, and connections to professional sports” (p. 106).

This tension is further demonstrated in the book through the case of Guy Fieri, a TV chef promoted to TV cooking by Food Network with a brief to attract to food and cooking male audiences who were until then an untapped audience marketing potential for the channel. But while Fieri’s cooking is—as Contois maintains—“populist,” including and celebrating foods that are popular with his audience and resisting what is otherwise considered healthy and elite, his fans simultaneously celebrate and deride his brand, highlighting the many contradictions of the dude concept. “The dude” allows men to both rebel against the established consumerist order and, at the same time, to diligently accept its core premises—to participate in the established gender order and at the same time to reject it.

Aiming to conceptually capture the flirtatious nature of the dude with what are seen as feminine attributes, Contois continuously speaks of “gender contamination,” a way to explain how stereotypical characteristics attributed to genders brush off one another. In aiming the book for the general market, it is perhaps understandable that the author does not delve deeper into what could be potentially perceived by readers as boring and tedious conceptual matters as compared to other interesting material presented in the book. For a more academic reader, such engagement would be worthwhile, especially since it is not clear whether the idea of “contamination” brings with it the many connotations the term otherwise suggests. Are feminine characteristics a contamination for the dude brand, for men in general, or (merely hypothetically) for the author herself? If so, who suggests so? How does “gender contamination” work?

In her conclusion, Contois notes a decline of the once mainstream discourses of the dude. With the pandemic striking in 2020, a different gender ideology emerges, resulting in “branding instead focused on gender neutrality, dropping the

dude along with any emphasis on gender” (p. 118). Bringing the dude full circle, she demonstrates the interconnectedness of gendered (and other) discourses and macro-sociocultural trends that emerge in societies and that enable various media and advertising ideas to develop and decline. In demonstrating this cycle so convincingly, *Diners, Dudes and Diets* is an important study into not only how discourse and power

intertwine to establish hegemonic meanings but also into how they do so in food discourse.

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